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ABSTRACT

This pamphlet attempts to make communicating with legislators easy. Each section includes a brief paragraph and several bullet points that present techniques or advice for simplifying communication. It begins with "Rules for Effective Advocacy," which presents a core set of basic advocacy principles, followed by "What Makes Politicians Tick?" and "Basic Ways To Communicate." "Personal Visits" includes tips for planning a meeting with an elected official, conducting a meeting with a policymaker, and suggestions for following up. "Writing Letters" provides letter-writing tips and ideas for writing to legislators, and shows how to address letters. "Using the Telephone" presents tips on phone communication, including how to find the phone number. Western Union's two options for telegrams are presented. How to communicate by e-mail, including how to find the correct address, is covered. "Testifying before a Legislative Committee" provides suggestions for doing homework, preparing remarks and written testimony, and testifying. "Building Rapport with Legislators" suggests ways to increase effectiveness as an advocate. This material is not specific to counseling, and could be used by schools or anyone with a cause to promote. (EMK)

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Effective Advocacy and Communication with Legislators

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RULES FOR EFFECTIVE ADVOCACY

Even if you've never talked or written to a legislator before, you probably already have all the skills you need to advocate effectively for yourself and the counseling profession. Most of what a good advocate does is intuitive and grows out of a few basic principles. Here are a core set upon which most advocates agree. Try to remember these principles when you become discouraged, entangled in detail, or simply confused. They may help clear your head, renew, and redirect your energies.

- Ask for what you want.
- Be specific in your request.
- Be ready to work hard.
- Find a legislative champion.
- Organize, coordinate, orchestrate.
- Touch all the bases.
- Stay flexible, be opportunistic.
- Keep it simple.
- Assume the perspective of others.
- Build and preserve your credibility.
- Anticipate and deal with your opposition.
- Be prepared to compromise.
- Never burn your bridges.
- Target your efforts.
- Honor the staff.
- Track your progress.
- Be persistent
- Follow up

WHAT MAKES POLITICIANS TICK?

Politicians have some common characteristics that make the outcome of advocacy efforts more predictable. Knowing these characteristics, and knowing how to take advantage of them, can improve your chances for success.

- Politicians hold public office to help others.
- Politicians like to be asked.
- Politicians are good learners.
- Politicians do not know everything.
- Politicians have many demands on their time.
- Politicians do not have sufficient resources to meet the demands made on them.
- Politicians are always running for office.
- Politicians respond to crises.
- Politicians behave differently when they know they're being watched.
- Politicians like to be thanked.
- Politicians love good press!

BASIC WAYS TO COMMUNICATE

There are a number of ways to communicate with policy makers--be they legislators who enact policy or agency staff who implement policy. Regardless of the communication vehicle being used, following are some general principles for good communication to keep in mind.

- Keep jargon at a minimum.
- Be concise and to the point.
- Reinforce good decision making.
- Communicate before decisions are made.
- Continue communication to meet changing needs.
- Be dependable and honest.
- Use the talents of other good communicators.
- Remember you represent others.
- Remember what you communicate may be shared.
- The message is more important than the medium.

...and most importantly... **JUST DO IT!**

A simple postcard saying "I hope you will support the counselor licensure bill" is better than no communication at all. Don't be intimidated or tell yourself that you don't have the time to "do it right". Do what you can and have time for. And just do it!

Personal Visits

A personal visit with a state legislator or a member of Congress is probably the most effective way to emphasize your interest in an issue or bill. A visit with your state legislator can occur either in the state capitol or in his or her local office; a visit with a member of Congress can be scheduled in Washington, D.C., or at one of his or her district offices. Local visits are often easier to schedule, less rushed, and give you more "quality time" with a legislator. Many legislators also have "office hours" on weekends. *You don't have to travel hundreds of miles in order to meet with your state or Federal legislators!*

Some tips for planning a meeting with an elected official:

- Make an appointment. Explain the reason for the meeting, the time needed (usually no more than 30 minutes), and identify any other individuals who will attend.
- Don't be put off or insulted if you are offered an opportunity to meet with staff instead of the legislator. Some legislators delegate many of their meetings with constituents to staff. This does not mean that your legislator will be unreceptive to your views or that your message will not be heard. Staff members do report back to their bosses about meetings with constituents and are often very influential in their own right.
- If others are going, decide who will present the information and how it will be presented. One possible format is to present the issue, the impact of the issue, and then possible solutions.
- Prepare and/or collect supporting materials to accompany your presentation.
- Practice your presentation.
- Learn about the legislator. Try to find out positions taken on similar issues.

Some tips for conducting a meeting with a policy maker:

- Be on time. Don't be disturbed if you have to wait since there may have been unavoidable delays or changes in the schedule.
- When you arrive, introduce yourself to the secretary. If you have a calling or business card, give one to the secretary.
- When you meet the legislator (or staff person), introduce yourself and identify the group you are representing. If you are a constituent, share that as well.

- State the reason for your visit concisely and accurately. Limit the number of issues you discuss and refer to bills by name and number.

- Give the legislator essential information, review the critical points, describe the impact of the legislation and share your recommendation.

- If your legislator has already publicly supported your position, express your thanks and tell him or her how much his or her efforts are appreciated. If your legislator has not yet committed to your position, clearly state reasons for supporting your position, and let him or her know you would appreciate his or her support. If your legislator is not supportive of your position, give him or her the information and politely ask him or her to reconsider the issue.

- Be prepared to answer questions.

- Leave fact sheets or supporting materials with the legislator. Include a contact name and number with the materials in case other questions arise.

- Have a picture taken with the official if possible. Use the picture in local newspapers to provide publicity for the official and your organization. Give a copy to your newsletter editor as well.

- Thank the legislator for his or her time and leave promptly.

Some suggestions for following up on a meeting with a policy maker:

- Immediately after the meeting, record what occurred--who you met with, issues discussed, responses received, and any follow-up needed.

- Write a thank-you letter to the official. Summarize points made and include any follow-up information requested.

- If you took a photo with the legislator and it is printed in your local newspaper or in your newsletter, be sure to send a copy to the legislator.

Writing Letters

Officials and their staffs pay careful attention to their mail since it forms the major body of public and voter sentiment on pending legislative activity.

Many find it difficult to know how to communicate with their legislator. Often, form letters with identical wording and petitions are used. Most legislators, however, place little weight on such an approach. The type of letter that is most appreciated and helpful is one that is carefully thought out and represents an individual's point of view concerning the bill or legislative matter that is being considered. It should explain how the measure will benefit the writer or the community, or how the measure can be improved. Since everyone does not have the same base of information or experience, letters should have clarity and simplicity, and at the same time reflect respect for the intelligence of the legislator and his staff.

Some tips for writing letters to elected officials:

- Identify yourself and your reason for writing.
- Be brief--keep your letter to one or two pages.
- Stick to one issue per letter.
- Refer to legislation by its bill number or title. If you don't know the number or title of a bill, describe the issue in enough detail to enable the legislator to respond thoughtfully and appropriately.
- Be specific. Explicitly ask the legislator to do something (vote for legislation X, cosponsor bill Y, sign on to a letter opposing bill Z, etc.), or ask to know their position on the topic you're interested in. Unless you ask for something specific, your legislator can and will respond with only vague niceties. Make it clear what it is you want him or her to do.
- Tell the legislator why the issue you're writing on is important to you, and stress any local implications the issue has, and how it will affect others in the community. Personalize your message if you can, including any personal experiences you have had that relate to the issue.
- Do not criticize or be negative. If you disagree with your legislator, tell him or her why, but be courteous and respectful.
- Send a blind copy of your letter and any reply you receive to your organization.

Other points to keep in mind when writing legislators:

- It is not necessary for you to type your letter, unless your handwriting is impossibly illegible. Most of the mail legislators receive from constituents is hand-written.
- Keep a copy of your letter.
- Report the good news, too. Do not limit your contacts to requests for support or complaints about actions your legislator has or has not taken. Use positive reinforcement. One of the greatest rewards legislators can receive--and one that is perhaps most cherished --is a simple letter thanking them for their performance.
- Do not expect to hear back within a week. Legislative offices often receive an extraordinary amount of mail. However, feel free to call the legislator's office if you have not received a reply within six weeks.

How to Address Letters

State Senator

The Honorable John Doe
State Senate
State House
Springfield, Illinois 62706

Dear Mr. Doe or Dear Senator Doe:

State Representative

The Honorable John Doe
State Representative
House of Representatives
State House
Springfield, Illinois 62706

Dear Mr. Doe or Dear Rep. Doe:

United States Senator

The Honorable John Doe
United States Senate
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Doe:

United States Representative

The Honorable John Doe
Member of Congress
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Representative Doe:

Using the Telephone

Telephone communication is most effective when time is of the essence and the issue you are concerned about will be addressed in the next several days or weeks. When you call, you may not be able to speak directly with the legislator, but you can be assured that your message will be relayed to him or her by the staff person you speak with.

Some points to keep in mind when telephoning legislators:

- Be prepared! Before calling, have your message written in front of you and review it carefully, so that you know exactly what you will say.
- As with letter writing, keep the message simple and concise. Ask for specific action on the part of the legislator, and make sure you know (or will soon be informed of) the legislator's position on your issue.
- Be sure to leave your name and address, and ask for a letter from your legislator in response to your call.
- Be courteous. Legislative staff work long hours for relatively low pay, and have many demands and pressures on their time. They are there to help you. They are much more likely to do so if you are nice to them.
- Although you will have done your homework before calling, don't be afraid to ask questions. You can learn a lot talking to staff about the political field of play regarding your issue, timelines for committee action, etc.

Finding the Phone Number

For your U.S. Representative and Senators, call the U.S. Capitol switchboard at (202) 224-3121 and ask for your legislator by name or by state and legislative district. The operator will connect you to the legislator's office.

For your state legislators, call the general number for the legislature (you can find this in most telephone books, often in the "blue pages") and ask for your legislator by name.

Telegrams

Western Union provides two special services for persons wishing to register their positions with elected representatives:

- Personal Opinion Telegram--allows a person to send a message of 20 words to elected legislators, or even the President, for $9.95 (just text).

- Mailgram Message--for longer messages, up to 50 words (including sender's and receiver's name and address, salutation, and close) for $17.95.

For more information on these and other services write to Western Union Telegraph Company, 1 Lake Street, Upper Saddle River, NJ 07458, or call your local Western Union office. Toll-free numbers are listed in local telephone directories.

E-Mail

Most U.S. Senators and Representatives have the capability to send and receive e-mail via the Internet and many encourage their constituents to use e-mail to communicate with them. Some state legislatures are beginning to use e-mail as well, but this is far less common.

If you do communicate by e-mail with a legislator, be sure to include your name and postal address in the body of your message. The legislator will want to check to be sure that you reside in his or her district before responding.

Finding the Right Address:

The Library of Congress World Wide Web page offers a variety of resources for identifying the e-mail addresses of your Representative and Senators. Point your web browser to:

http://lcweb.loc.gov/global/legislative/email.html

Testifying Before a Legislative Committee

Legislative committees often hold hearings to gather information on an issue or piece of legislation. Being selected to testify before a legislative committee provides you with a valuable opportunity to advocate for the counseling profession. You do not have to wait to be invited to testify. If a legislative committee has scheduled a hearing on a bill or issue that affects professional counselors or is something upon which counselors have expertise, contact the committee and request an opportunity to testify. If the committee already has a full roster of witnesses, you can also submit written testimony that will be included in the hearing record.

Some suggestions to keep in mind if you are invited to testify:

- Do your homework. Gather as much information as possible about the issue. Talk to key people in your organization and the field.
- Find out who else is testifying at the same hearing with you. If they are opposed to your position, anticipate and counter their arguments in your testimony.
- Determine the best person to serve as the witness who presents testimony. The testimony should be delivered by a knowledgeable, articulate person who is familiar (or has been thoroughly briefed) on the issue(s).
- Prepare a draft of the testimony and get feedback from several persons in the field and in the organization.
- Include in your testimony evidence to support your position, real-life examples of the impact of the legislation, and alternatives for those areas of the legislation that you oppose. Remember that examples of your own personal or professional experience provide the best supporting evidence when intertwined with other factual information.
- If your written testimony is longer than 2 pages, prepare a brief summary of your remarks to read at the hearing.
- Know what your opposition is saying and be prepared to respond to their concerns in case a committee member asks you questions during the hearing.
- Prior to the hearing, offer to submit sample questions to the committee that you would like to be asked. Many legislators welcome this. Be prepared to answer any questions you suggest.
- If you are asked a question and do not have the answer, say so. Tell committee members that you will try to get the answer for them and submit it for the record at a later time. Be sure to follow-up. If you feel that a question is not in your field, say so.
- Avoid partisan remarks.

Building Rapport with Legislators

You can enhance your effectiveness as an advocate by establishing a relationship with a legislator that is based on more than simply asking them to do something (or not do something) once or twice a year. Use your skills as a professional counselor to find ways to build rapport with your legislators. Establishing rapport does not guarantee that a legislator will do what you want when you ask them. But it will ensure that you will have the access you need in order to present your case.

Some ways you can build rapport with legislators:

- Invite a legislator to address a meeting of your organization. Be flexible about the topic of the talk, suggesting general issues like education or mental health, or even how counselors can work more effectively with their legislators. A legislator may not be comfortable addressing issues that are highly specific to the counseling profession because they do not have enough information to make a good presentation. Which is fine. Just get them there. You can educate them later.

- Invite your legislators to visit a program that you administer or work in. Legislators like to learn about what's going on in their district. If it is appropriate and would not be disruptive or invasive of the privacy of other participants, invite legislators to visit and learn more about a program or service you provide to a school or the community.

- If a legislator has done something noteworthy for the counseling profession or on issues that are important to the profession, recognize what they have done by presenting an award. But only recognize real accomplishments and effort. Don't present an unearned award just to try to gain access and favor. It won't work and will only embarrass you and the legislator.

- Attend "town meetings" and other forums sponsored by your legislators. Introduce yourself and let him or her know what you do. If there is no "burning issue" you need his or her help with at the moment, so much the better. You're building a relationship so that when you do need his or her help, you'll be more likely to get it.

- Volunteer to work in political campaigns. If there's a candidate you support, call his or her campaign headquarters and offer to volunteer. Even if you can only spare one night to help out, legislators appreciate any and all the help they get. They and their staff will remember that you helped out--and consider you a "V.I.P." because of it (Working in campaigns can be a great way to network, too. You might find yourself stuffing envelopes one night next to a member of the school board or a physician who might later give you client referrals.)